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AUTHOR Minner, Sam; And Others
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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines results of three informal surveys identifying barriers that Native Americans face when trying to complete a college degree. For the first survey, 22 Native American students who had dropped out of Northern Arizona University indicated that family influences and responsibilities, lack of financial resources, campus attitudes towards Native Americans, and poor academic preparation were reasons for leaving school. These dropouts also indicated that additional support services such as professors who demonstrated a caring attitude would have made a difference in their decision to withdraw. In the second survey, nine Native American participants in their first year of a field-based special-education teacher training program were asked to identify the most difficult aspects of taking courses on a university campus and the most desirable traits in a university professor. Respondents indicated that difficulties were associated with family obligations, time management, tuition and finances, and distance from home. Desirable traits for professors included good communication skills, likeable personality, willingness to help, treats students equally, flexibility, and high expectations. In the third survey, nine Native American students in the field-based preservice program indicated that cultural traditions were sometimes a barrier to higher education for Native Americans, as were lack of financial support, inadequate high school preparation, alcohol and drugs, poor academic advising, and language barriers. (LP)

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Dr. Sam Minner
Vernell Bizardi
Virginia Arthur
Jackie Chischille
Jesse Holiday
Rebecca Pyron
Amber Rezzonico
Brenda Yellowhair
Northern Arizona University
Flagstaff Arizona
Kayenta Unified School District
Kayenta Arizona

# COMPLETING UNIVERSITY DEGREES: BARRIERS FOR NATIVE AMERICANS

In this paper we will outline the results of three informal surveys. These results indicate possible barriers that Native Americans may face when trying to complete a University degree.

Minner and Prater (1992) interviewed 22 Native American students (15 women and 7 men) in person or by phone. These interviews occurred during the fall term 1990, the spring term 1991 and the fall term 1991. All of the students interviewed had left the Northern Arizona University campus prior to completing their degrees. Key questions asked were: Why did you leave the university and what factors could have promoted your retention?

The following is a content analysis of this survey:

## Content Analysis

### Item #1

16 people made similar statements about why they left. These statements have been categorized as Family Factors.

- "My parents never really wanted me to attend NAU. They were afraid that I would not come back home. They were afraid that I would get a degree and move to Phoenix or somewhere where I could get a good job."
- "My mother is very old and needs a lot of care. She has to go to the hospital every other week. There was no one to help her. That was hard for her and hard for me."
- "My father told me that it was wrong for me to not be around home. He said that it was selfish. I told him that I could get a good job if I got my degree, but he said that that was foolish talk. He wanted me home. I think he was lonely."

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- "I think my family had something to do with my decision. I tried to get home as often as I could, but it was hard. When I was home, I couldn't study much. My parents and grandparents wanted me to help them and I didn't have time for studying. When I tried to do my studies I was interrupted and I was told to put my books and things away."

10 people made similar comments about finances. These comments were categorized as Financial Factors.

- "The tribe was supposed to give me a scholarship, but it never came through. I had very little money and my family couldn't help me out."
- I was very confused about the whole financial aid business. The people in that office were not very friendly or helpful. When I asked for help, they told me to fill out a bunch of forms which I really didn't understand. I needed help."
- ".....money was a big problem for me. One week, I barely had enough food to eat."
- "I couldn't survive on my loans. It might have been different if I had been there alone. But, my family was with me."

6 people talked about the attitudes they felt on campus. These comments were categorized as Campus Climate Factors.

- "I was very lonely. One of my classes broke into groups for a project. I was alone. I was the only Indian in the class. The teacher finally put me into a group, but I know that nobody really wanted me."
- "Indians are not very comfortable in class. We have nowhere to go. We don't know anyone. I was kind of afraid."
- "I was really left out of things. I missed my friends."

2 people talked about their preparation for college. These comments were categorized as Prep. Factors

- "I couldn't believe how hard things were. I studied and studied all the time, but I still did not do very well. I guess my high school work was no good. I was not very well prepared."
- "My high school work was good. I got all A's and B's. But, it was very hard at NAU and no one would help you."

Item #2

12 people made comments pertaining to additional support they wished they had received. These comments were categorized as Support Factors.

- "What I needed was a friend and helper. If someone would have helped me, I think I might have stayed on campus. No one helped me."
- "Only one person went out of his way to help me out. Dr. _____ asked me if I needed help and talked with me about NAU. He was great, but was not always around. I needed more help with things."
- "It would be nice if we had a place where Indian students could meet and talk. Now, we all go our own ways and never get together. We need a place like this and someone to go to."

5 people talked specifically about their professors. These comments were categorized as Professor Factors.

- "My professors were not very good. They did not help us or even seemed to want us in their classes."
- "One of my professors talked to me about a paper in front of the whole class. The paper was not very good, I guess. But, he shouldn't have embarrassed me that way."

The second survey was conducted by Prater (1993). Participants in this survey were involved in the first year of the Rural Special Education Project (RSEP). The RSEP is a field-based preservice teacher training program located in Kayenta, Arizona. This program is a partnership between Northern Arizona University's (NAU) Center for Excellence in Education (CEE) and Kayenta Unified School District (KUSD).

Nine Native American Students were asked to respond to a written survey. Two of the items on the survey were : #1 what are the most difficult aspects of taking courses on a university campus and #2 list traits that you find most desirable in a university professor.

Item #1: What are the most difficult aspects of taking courses on a university campus?

6 Native Americans stated family obligations or being away from family as one aspect.

- "My immediate family ask of me to help sometimes. Majorly it's a big issue like grandparents' medical state. None of my aunts and uncles are comfortable to take them to the hospital."

3 Native Americans stated that time/management was a difficult aspect.

- "**TIME**. **TIME** is the most difficult for me...(I) don't have time with my family. A lot of test to administer while trying to do observation and work with school and meetings after school. But mostly it's **TIME**!!!"

- My time management is a problem. I need a system where I can follow it consistently and realistic."

4 Native Americans stated that tuition and finances were difficult aspects.

- "Obtaining tuition is usually the problem for full-time. Summer school is not difficult to attend since scholarship from the tribe is a full sum. Regular semester would be hard to get because of the scholarship and others."

3 Native Americans stated that distance was a difficult aspect.

- "...especially if you don't have a place to stay and having to drive 150 miles home every weekend."

1 Native American stated that living on campus was a difficult aspect.

1 Native American stated that finding his/her way around campus was a difficult aspect.

Item #2: List traits that you find most desirable in a university professor.

- communicate information in an understandable format/get to the point
- personality
- gives time/approachable/willing to help
- doesn't favor certain students
- flexible
- high expectations

The third informal survey was conducted by the authors of this paper during the spring, 1995 semester. The nine individuals completing this survey were Native Americans and participants in the RSEP. The surveys consisted of a sheet of paper with one question at the top of the page. That question was: In your opinion or experience what are some of the barriers for Native Americans in continuing higher education after high school?

The following is an analysis of the responses:

Six people made similar statements regarding traditions and culture. These statements have been categorized as Cultural Factors.

- "Family comes first and a lot of us want to expand our education but we tend to move closer to our family. Family is the number one priority. Many families need help raising the livestock and the elderly people need help."

- "In an average Navajo home setting, the family is close and any ceremonies held or any religious activity happening, the student may feel obligated to attend. If a student is unable to attend and the further away a student is from home, the harder it might be to concentrate on lessons, or the lack of transportation back to school or the length of the ceremony may have immediate effects on the student."

- "There are many feelings we have when we are in an unfamiliar place. That goes with being in a classroom with many strangers and perhaps being the only minority or one of the very few. Before one can answer questions or make a comment, we need to know a little about the other students or teacher. Some of us don't like to lose face by making wrong answers in front of strangers or anybody for that matter. So the best thing is to remain quiet and that would reflect on our course grade."

5 people made similar comments about financial support. These comments have been categorized as Financial Factors.

- "For many I believe have trouble in continuing higher education for financial reasons. Sure there are scholarships. But some scholarships have a limit and usually don't offer to students for various reasons."

- "Many tribes are funded with many dollars so that high school graduates who want to continue higher education can get the opportunity to. Yet there is a limited amount of money. Many miss out on the opportunity so they work in the fields, become sheepherders, or work part-time jobs to get by."

2 people cited lack of high school preparation as a factor.

- "In college there are numerous times a lengthy writing assignment is required. If a student is not well prepared during high school years, a paper is a threatening assignment. There may be lots of ideas generated in their minds, but it is difficult to write them down on paper in an orderly fashion. Another factor would be the difference of math taught in high school and a college level course. The college student is ill-prepared to do work at a higher level when they haven't had the chance during high school years."

1 person cited drugs and alcohol as factors.

- "The biggest barrier that I see is that of alcohol and marijuana. Many after high school fall into the cracks of using alcohol and drugs. They tend to lose focus on

family, jobs, education, and most importantly themselves. They probably feel guilty and lose confidence in themselves."

1 person cited poor advising as a factor.

- "I had no guidelines when I was in college. I had depended on a few friends, but that wasn't enough. I would have been successful if I had a bilingual advisor."

1 person cited language as a factor.

- "I have hard (time) in college because I speak Navajo the most at home and to my friends around the campus."

In summary, we feel several barriers that Native Americans may encounter in completing a university degree have been identified. Universities trying to recruit and retain Native American students may benefit by attempting to remove these perceived barriers. If institutions of higher education are successful in addressing these issues hopefully it will be reflected in an increased graduation rate for Native Americans.

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